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Soviets and Terrorist Activity: World of Shadow and Shading

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Charges last week by Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. that the Soviet Union was "training, funding and equipping" the forces of terrorism have suddenly thrust the shadowy world of international terrorist activity into the front lines of U.S. foreign policy and into the middle of a bitter and escalating verbal duel with Moscow.

A few days before Haig spoke, President Reagan had welcomed the American hostages home from Iran and promised "swift and effective retribution" against future terrorist acts, a pledge that also focused attention on improving U.S. abilities to combat terrorism.

Haig's remarks, linking Moscow to global terrorism far more directly than past administrations have, appear to be part of an attempt to broaden public perception of the Soviet threat to U.S. interests — a threat customarily expressed primarily in terms of Soviet military power.

A State Department spokesman, pressed the next day to explain what Haig meant, pointed to Soviet support for the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) "whose members have often been involved in acts of terrorism." He mentioned Moscow's use of Cuban and Libyan surrogates as conduits for assistance to terror groups, Soviet support for national liberation groups "that have used terrorist tactics," and general Soviet advocacy of armed struggle to solve regional problems such as those in El Salvador and Namibia.

Spokesman William Dyess added the official opinion that if the Russians "clearly understand that their fostering of terrorism is going to be very important to our future relations, then I think they will take heed."

Behind the scenes, however, Haig's blunt charges have also stirred confusion and controversy among some West European diplomats as well as some U.S. civilian and military officials.

Soon after Haig spoke, diplomats here inquired of U.S. intelligence contacts if Washington had new evidence of Soviet involvement with terrorists.

Sources say the Europeans were told U.S. intelligence files contain little or no hard evidence directly linking Moscow to the kinds of groups that traditionally have been branded as terrorists, such as Italy's Red Brigades, Japan's Red Army, offshoots of the Baader-Meinhof gang in West Germany, Armenian groups that assassinate Turkish diplomats, or even the Iranian militants that seized the U.S. embassy.

There is evidence of Soviet military, though not necessarily terrorist, training for some members of the PLO. The PLO, however, draws considerable political and financial support from many countries, including some such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan which are important to the United States and which view the Palestinians as insurgents rather than terrorists.

In the past, the United States has carefully refrained from branding the entire PLO a terrorist organization. Reagan came closest last Monday in an interview when he spoke of "the terrorism that is being practised by the PLO." Previous administrations have described the PLO as an umbrella-type political organization of many elements, some of which use terrorism.

There is also evidence that the Soviets and their Cuban, Libyan and East German allies provide financial, military, political and advisory support for a variety of insurgencies and so-called national liberation movements around the world. However, a view also widely held in many western countries is that many of these movements or insurgencies in Africa or Central America are not primarily Soviet fronts — though they receive Soviet aid — but are born of complex economic, racial and nationalistic movements. Intelligence sources also suggest that Cuba and Libya frequently move on their own rather than at the Kremlin's direction.

Those who are privately expressing concern about Haig's frontal attack on Moscow on the terrorism question believe it poses two dangers to foreign policy.

By blurring the distinction between the more commonly identified terrorist groups and the more politically motivated insurgencies and liberation movements that may also use terror tactics, the United States risks alienating friendly countries, especially in the Third World, which do not regard these movements as either terrorists or dupes of Moscow. The second risk they see involves being imprecise with Moscow on such an emotional subject.

There is also concern that with its broad definition of terrorism, the new administration may run into the same problems with the Kremlin that the Carter administration did at the outset by confronting Moscow on human rights. While the human rights campaign may have put the Soviets on the defensive initially, U.S.-Soviet relations never really recovered and the Carter White House was vulnerable to charges of a double standard in not applying the same pressure to nations more friendly to the United States.